

Corps Taught Retiree About Character, Became Her Family...

Contributed by Mike Tharp
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CORPS TAUGHT RETIREE ABOUT CHARACTER, BECAME HER FAMILY—AND SHE BECAME
“CALIFORNIA WOMAN OF YEAR”;

The Corps taught Valaria Lincoln, a District retiree, how to judge character—through a No. 200 sieve.

The diameter of wire mesh in such a sieve is only 0.075 millimeters, the cutoff line between sandy gravel and silt or clay. Fine gravel—good for a foundation—slips through; silt and clay, not so good a base, don’t get past the mesh.

Valaria learned that in the 1960s and early ’70s when she wrote design specs and did other chores for the District until heart trouble forced her to step down. Among the projects where she used that sieve was the Marina Del Rey Harbor. That taught her a lesson. “I sort people through a sieve now,” she says. “Clay won’t work. Gravel is good to put a building on. If you don’t land on the No. 200—goodbye!”

Although health problems curtailed her Corps career, Valaria treasures her time at the District. She recently attended the annual Retirees Luncheon, and it brought a tide of memories flooding back.

She landed in L.A. from Nebraska in 1961, newly divorced, with daughter Kim, 5 ½, and son Kent, 4, in tow. She took and passed a civil service test and was called by an outfit she’d never heard of—the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. She reported to what was then called the Editing Unit, where Elizabeth Jewell gave her and another applicant a typing test.

She soon reported to work on a three-month temporary tryout, typing specification plans on stencils (this was a generation before copy machines, and only those of a certain age remember the purple color and chemical tang of mimeograph machine fluid).

As happens, one of those reductions-in-force came down, but Valaria quickly found another job at another engineering giant, Ralph N. Parsons, as a receptionist. She tried to learn as much as she could in the private sector, but still wandered back almost daily to the District to lunch with her former colleagues. “So they wouldn’t forget me,” she explains.

They didn’t, and when budget once again expanded, she was brought back to the District. At first she typed, edited and read specs, then a woman in Publications in the next room went on vacation. Valaria apparently did OK filling in because when the District moved to the Federal Bldg., there was a brand-new GS-5 working in Publications.

She remembers the “patience and understanding” of her bosses back then. She and her kids were living with her sister on 77th Street, and she had to take them to nursery school every day before reporting for work. She’d run “in 3-inch heels” to Florence Avenue to get a bus to Figueroa, where she’d transfer to another one headed downtown. “I was nearly always 15 minutes late,” she confesses, “then I’d just give them an hour of my leave time for having been late. That’s the only way to do it.”

Although she liked Publications, she hankered for a job in Construction. Back at the University of Nebraska, she’d been 13 credits shy of graduating with a degree in Classical Languages, Latin and Greek. So when the head of Construction Branch, Richard Hewitt, asked her what she knew about construction, she replied:

“Con = with; struo = to build; ion = a state of.”

Alea jacta est!*

She was moved in with the civil engineers on one side of the room, the “estimating” engineers on the other. Her efficiency prompted one of her bosses, Robert Perkins, to get her to apply for a Corps-paid international correspondence course in engineering. “He said he’d OK the school if I’d swear on a spec book that I wouldn’t leave the Corps.”

She so swore, took the classes, got all A’s—and they sat me with the engineers where I wrote specs—I was the first woman in LA District to write specifications—until I had my heart attack. She was finally forced into disability retirement in 1972.

Valaria had also been busy raising her kids in south Central Los Angeles. It wasn't any easier then than it would be today, though for different reasons. Her children didn't have to worry about gangs, for example, but they did have to deal with discrimination.

To get her son into Fairfax High, then an academic paragon (where, she says she was told, "the black quota is filled") she donned a long dress from the Sudan that her mother had sent her, wore a red blouse ("to emphasize my cheekbones") and told the admissions official that her father was an Omaha Indian and her mother an Apache. There was still room, it seemed, under the "Indian quota." She recalls, "I did everything but put a feather in my hair."

He got in.

(Years later, Valaria learned that she is, in fact, one-eighth Comanche.)

Her daughter graduated from University High School, went on to college and is now manager of a State Disability Office in Ontario. Her son went to LA City College but got a job with Western Airlines, which quickly led to one with Southwest Airlines, where he has spent the last 23 years. He's also been involved in the NFL Raiders organization in various security jobs for the past 17 years.

Two years ago, then-speaker of the California Assembly Herb Wesson named Valaria "2003 Woman of the Year." She was flown to Sacramento and treated, she remembers, like "queen for a day" for what the plaque said was "her outstanding service and dedication to the people of California."

For after her medical retirement, it seems, Valaria volunteered. Despite five years in and out of hospital, she volunteered. With the Greater LA Community Action Agency, for instance, on the executive board. She helped raise money for a friend's nursery school on Western Avenue. She instilled the fear of the Lord in some 30 neighborhood children, who found her a beacon of disciplined warmth in an ever-colder environment.

At some point in those years, the District's Dick Hightower called, saying she could come back to the Corps to be assistant chief in Specifications and Estimates, as a GS-9. That dream had to be canceled, however, when it became clear the federal government couldn't be liable for a pre-existing medical condition. Still, she says, "it was very, very good of him."

Today, her health is fine—a combination of diet, exercise and "my faith in God" as a fifth-generation Episcopalian.

Recently, she was riding on a boat in Marina Del Rey Harbor and walked up to the pilot. "I wrote the specs for this," she told him, "from excavation to final cleanup." He told her he'd been manning boats for 40 years in southern California, and "this was the best man-made waterway he'd ever piloted—boy did I stick out my chest!"

Why, after more than 40 years since working at the District—a job she held for only a decade—does Valaria still come to the Retirees Luncheon? "I love the fact that once you're Corps of Engineers, you're always Corps of Engineers," she enthuses. "It's family."

A family that would pass the No. 200 sieve test.

*"The die is cast!" Supposed uttered by Julius Ceasar as he crossed the Rubicon River into Gual (present-day France) with the Roman army, signifying the taking of a great step.